

VZCZCXRO3919
PP RUEHAG RUEHBC RUEHDE RUEHKUK RUEHROV
DE RUEHLB #1220/01 2321429
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 191429Z AUG 08
FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 2801
INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 2756
RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 3002
RHMFISS/CDR USCENCOM MACDILL AFB FL
RHEHAAA/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001220

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR NEA/FO, NEA/ELA, PM/FO
ALSO FOR IO ACTING A/S HOOK, WARLICK
P FOR HMUSTAFA, RRANGASWAMY
USUN FOR KHALILZAD/WOLFF/SCHEDLBAUER
NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/YERGER/MCDERMOTT

E.O. 12958: DECL: 08/18/2018

TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PINR](#) [UNSC](#) [MARR](#) [MOPS](#) [SY](#) [LE](#)

SUBJECT: LEBANON: DRUZE (OPPOSITION) MINISTER: U.S. SHOULD
BE BALANCED PARTNER FOR LEBANON, REGION

REF: A. BEIRUT 1201

[1](#)B. BEIRUT 739

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b)
and (d).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) An affable Minister of Youth and Sports Talal Arslan welcomed the recent Damascus meeting between Presidents Sleiman and Assad as a positive step in putting the Lebanese-Syrian bilateral relationship back on a good track. Thanking the U.S. for its military assistance, Arslan said the list of possible candidates for the army commander had been narrowed to two, although President Sleiman preferred to submit to the cabinet only one name to avoid splitting the army. Arslan called for an expanded National Dialogue, and bemoaned the influence of regional actors and confessional strife in undermining Lebanon's democratic system. Arslan attributed improved relations with Druze rival Walid Jumblatt as a necessary step to safeguarding Lebanon's Druze minority.
End summary.

VISIT MEETS EXPECTATIONS,
FOR THE MOST PART

[1](#)2. (C) Charge Grant, accompanied by Pol/Econ Chief and Senior LES Political Advisor, met with Druze Minister of Youth and Sports and leader of the Lebanese Democratic Party Talal Arslan at his home in Khalde on August 18. Marwan Abu Fadel (Senior Advisor and de facto translator for the meeting), Ziad Choueiri, Vice President of the party, and Salim Hamadeh, Foreign Affairs advisor, and his secretary attended on Arslan's side.

PRAISE FOR DAMASCUS MEETING

[1](#)3. (C) Arslan described the atmosphere in the new cabinet as excellent, with all parties making an effort to "turn the page." Noting that President Sleiman had briefed the cabinet on August 15, following his trip to Damascus (Ref A) Arslan lauded the summit as positive, especially after three years of tension with Syria. Lebanon cannot afford to be totally against Syria, he said, for social more than political reasons. There are still strong family connections between the two countries, including the Druze communities, he

explained. Furthermore, Arslan believed Sleiman could succeed in mending the bilateral relationship because of the mutual confidence generated during his nine years (n.b., six under Syrian occupation) as Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces. We need confidence-building, he said, and Sleiman is the man to do this.

¶4. (C) On diplomatic relations, Arslan confirmed that on August 21 Lebanon and Syria would issue simultaneous decrees to establish diplomatic relations at the ambassadorial level (provided, he added, that Lebanon did not reject Syria's overture, as he claimed it did in 1962). He expected that some points of the bilateral treaties between Syria and Lebanon would be revised, adding that the cabinet had decided to distribute the entire package of treaties only for comment. The Higher Syrian-Lebanese Council was not included in the package, he said, implying that there was no proposal to disband the Council following the establishment of diplomatic relations.

¶5. (C) On detainees, Arslan said a committee within the Ministry of Justice would follow up. On borders, he said President Sleiman himself had decided to take responsibility for both control and "delimitation" of the borders, explaining that Sleiman wanted to reserve all delicate security matters for himself. (Note: The Ministries of Defense and Interior are the two key players here; both Ministers are Sleiman appointees. End note.) All other issues would be referred to their respective ministries.

LAF COMMANDER:

BEIRUT 00001220 002 OF 003

DOWN TO TWO NAMES?

¶6. (C) Arslan reported that two names were still being considered for Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Georges Khoury and Jean Kawaji, and that it was possible both would be sent to the cabinet for a vote. However, President Sleiman preferred to nominate to the cabinet just one candidate, to avoid splitting the army. Arslan agreed with this approach, stressing the need to keep the army, as the only strong state institution, strong. Arslan also took the opportunity to thank the U.S. for its military assistance.

SEEKING A SEAT AT
NATIONAL DIALOGUE TABLE

¶7. (C) On the National Dialogue, Arslan argued for a seat at the table, adding that without the participation of additional figures from the opposition, (Marada leader) Suleiman Franjieh, Sunni opposition leader Omar Karame, and himself, it would be an "amputated dialogue." Lebanon's is a consensual democracy, he said, whereby no one can impose its will on the other, and the majority cannot rule without the minority. Noting that this principle was enshrined in the preamble of the constitution, Arslan dubbed it a weak point in Lebanon's democratic system, because it ruled out the possibility of checks and balances.

¶8. (C) Furthermore, Lebanon was not a real democracy because the highest position a Druze could reach was minister, he complained. (Note: In addition to some Druze ministers in the cabinet, the acting LAF Commander, General al-Masri, is a Druze. However, under Lebanon's confessional based system for filling important government positions, the LAF Commander position is reserved for a Maronite Christian. End note.) Arslan advocated using proportional representation as the best way to ensure that all of Lebanon's parties were represented in the political system.

REGIONAL INFLUENCE,
CONFESSIONAL SYSTEM
AT HEART OF LEBANON'S WOES

¶9. (C) Turning to Lebanese-U.S. relations, Arslan stressed that "no one in Lebanon does not want" good relations, because everyone recognizes that the U.S. can be a "fair" partner in the region and help promote regional stability. However, he complained that in the past the U.S. had only opened up to the March 14 majority. Now a real, effective U.S. role was needed to save the country.

¶10. (C) Arslan explained that because of Lebanon's weak political system, it was influenced by all the regional players, which discouraged Lebanese from taking real stands on issues. This is why we always say we will be the last ones to sign a peace treaty with Israel, he said, because we would not dare risk the criticism of our Arab partners for acting before them. Citing the recent violence in Tripoli (which he appeared to attribute to Salafists), Arslan said this was an example of foreign issues being transferred to Lebanon. The Salafists are hidden in a cocoon, he said, and no one can stop them, because their decisions are not made here.

¶11. (C) Furthermore, Lebanon was the political and security hostage of its own confessional system, he said. The August 18 agreement between some of the Salafists and Hizballah was an effort to avoid a Sunni-Shia conflict, he said. Hizballah is obsessed with avoiding such a conflict, which would be not only a local but a regional disaster, he added. Relaying that he had met with Saudi Ambassador Khoja the previous week, Arslan said the Saudis shared this concern out of fear of Iran, and majority leader Saad Hariri did not have the freedom to act against the Saudis. There are no Salafists in Syria, Arslan commented, adding dryly that perhaps the Syrians knew what they were doing during the 1978 Hama massacre.

BEIRUT 00001220 003 OF 003

DRUZE CIRCLE
THE WAGONS

¶12. (C) Arslan confirmed that his relationship with Druze rival Walid Jumblatt had improved following the May conflict and Doha agreement. He claimed they did not discuss politics, adding that he respected Jumblatt's Druze "niche," and could not predict the implications of this new cooperation for the 2009 legislative elections.

¶13. (C) Criticizing Jumblatt for adopting too harsh a tone toward Syria in recent statements, Arslan said even Jumblatt admitted he went too far. The most important thing is to protect the Druze communities, he said; the Druze cannot be the front line for Lebanon's problems. Unfortunately, deals happened at the expense of Lebanon's minorities, which is why historically all of Lebanon's various confessional groups except the Druze have sought regional protection. The Christians already know this, he said, noting that Christians and Druze made up the bulk of Lebanese emigration and, unlike the Shia, are unlikely to return. Over 30 percent of Lebanese Druze now live outside of Lebanon, he said.

COMMENT

¶14. (C) An affable contact, Arslan did not camouflage his affinity for Syria (where he travels frequently) but at the same time was openly warm towards the U.S. (where he attended George Washington University) and American democracy. Surrounded by cameras and advisors, he seemed pleased to be back in the spotlight. Jumblatt ally and Druze Minister Wael Abu Four had told us Arslan was "an idiot". While we would not go that far, he certainly is not a nuanced thinker like rival Jumblatt (though perhaps not as prone to mood swings either).

